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**Clower, Jason (transl. and ed.): Late Works of Mou Zongsan – Selected  
Essays on Chinese Philosophy**

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**Clower, Jason (transl. and ed.):** *Late Works of Mou Zongsan – Selected Essays on Chinese Philosophy*. (Modern Chinese Philosophy; 7), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015, xii + 242 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-27889-9.

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Twenty years after “the Confucian among philosophers, the philosopher among Confucians”<sup>1</sup> passed away in 1995, Jason Clower presents a selection of English translations of texts by Mou Zongsan (1909–1995). “If twentieth-century China produced a philosopher of the first rank,” Clower opens his introduction, “it was Mou Zongsan” (p.1). On the one hand, there can be no doubt about Mou’s deeply ingrained Confucianism, and his work bespeaks his familiarity with much of the philosophical heritage of both China and the occident – especially its Anglo-American, but also Graeco-Roman and German compartments. However, people like Yu Yingshi 余英時, Lin Anwu 林安梧,<sup>2</sup> but also mainland-based scholars like Jiang Qing 蔣慶 have criticised Mou for exiling Confucianism into the ivory tower of philosophical speculation, largely disregarding its societal and institutional aspects and their potential relevance for present day China. Likewise, Mou’s exceptional status as a philosopher, suggested by Clower and claimed by many of his students and convinced readers, remains controversial.<sup>3</sup> What is beyond contention, however, is that Mou was not only an erudite and polymath, but also an extremely prolific writer. His studies penetrate the remotest confines of Chinese intellectual history and his collected works comprise several thousand pages in 32 volumes.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the last two decades, Mou

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1 This is how Cai Renhou, one of Mou’s most prominent students and professor emeritus at Tunghai University in Taichung, has characterised Mou in his obituary (Lehmann 1998: 197).

2 For a short overview in English see Makeham 2008: 176–180.

3 Lee Ming-Huei, another of Mou’s students, at one point praises his teacher’s “philosophical genius” (Lee 2001: 65). This enthusiasm is not restricted to Mou’s immediate students: In a recent study based on her PhD thesis, N. Serina Chan at least twice asserts Mou’s theoretical “genius” (Chan 2011: 116, 186). On the other extreme of the scale, there are people like Stephan Schmidt who with respect to Mou’s claim that his moral metaphysics has sublated (*aufgehoben*) “the vastly different dualisms” discussed by Mou states that “this is unpersuasive to the point of caricature” (Schmidt 2011: 272).

4 Mou’s complete works were published by Linking Press in 2003.

Zongsan has become one of the most widely studied twentieth century thinkers in the Chinese speaking world: A full-text search for Mou's name in the mainland-based China Academic Journals Full-text Database yields an impressive amount of 9,452 hits.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, there have been only a few book-length studies dedicated to Mou in Western languages, in spite of a growing interest in his work. Among the handful of books dealing with Mou's thought, a considerable share of three monographs have appeared in Brill's *Modern Chinese Philosophy* series<sup>6</sup> – the very series which not only includes the anthology under discussion, but whose second installment is Clower's own *The Unlikely Buddhist* published in 2011. This book is based on his doctoral dissertation (Harvard 2008) and expounds Mou's work on Chinese Buddhism and its significance for his philosophical thought. Given Mou's prominence it is surprising that, so far, only a single one of his dozens of works seems to be available in any Western language.<sup>7</sup> According to the dustjacket blurb, the collection of essays selected, translated and commented by Jason Clower is the very first printed publication of texts by Mou in English translation ever. It thus doubtless meets a long-standing desideratum.

Mou Zongsan has designated his philosophy by the term “moral metaphysics”. His philosophical systematisation of Confucianism not least was aimed at reconstructing the history of Chinese philosophy from a distinctively Confucian perspective. Identifying a specifically Confucian notion of “moral autonomy” as the core of Chinese thought, Mou has chosen Kant's term of “intellektuelle Anschauung” (intellectual intuition), or, more precisely, his own Chinese translation of it, *zhi de zhijue* (智的直覺), literally “immediate awareness of wisdom”, to refer to the kind of intuitive experience of morality that is allegedly testified in the writings of traditional Neo-Confucians. For him, this practical spiritual experience marks the lynchpin of Neo-Confucian discussions about personal cultivation. However, the “loftiest and most profound question in philosophy” (p.103), the problem of the “perfect teaching” (*yuanjiao* 圓教), Mou finds discussed in Chinese Buddhist scholastics. The notion of the “perfect teaching” is pivotal for Mou's reinterpretation of the concept of the *summum bonum* (*yuanshan* 圓善) which in turn marks the very core of his philosophy. Due to the diversity of his intellectual

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<sup>5</sup> China Academic Journals Fulltext Database, <http://oversea.cnki.net/kns55/brief/result.aspx> (18/08/2015).

<sup>6</sup> Clower 2010, Chan 2011, Billioud 2011. The series was established in 2010. It is edited by John Makeham.

<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Kamenarović and Pastor have published a French translation of Mou Zongsan's *Zhongguo zhexue de tezhi* (The Peculiarity of Chinese Philosophy, Chinese original 1962).

references, Mou in his writings rather liberally combines and interrelates technical terms and concepts from traditions as distant and diverse from each other as Kantian transcendentalism, the Neo-Confucian “teaching of the heart-mind” (*xinxue* 心學), and Buddhist Tiantai scholastics, to name but the most prominent cardinal points of his philosophical universe (cf. also p. 6). Clower, who is familiar with the sprawling intellectual edifices of Chinese Buddhist scholastics which prove at least as important as Neo-Confucian ethics or Kantian idealism for unravelling the intricate theoretical constructions of Mou’s philosophy, is thus excellently prepared for mastering the challenging task of translating Mou’s multifaceted and – at least in part – theoretically highly ambitious texts into English.

In view of the sheer diversity of Mou’s intellectual references and the complexity of his work, the very fact that Clower has succeeded to provide a faithful and highly readable translation without lapsing into technical jargon is admirable in itself. As Clower observes, it is not so much the complexity of Mou’s argumentation which sometimes renders his texts extremely difficult, but rather his tendency to renounce on making his claims more explicit (p. 24). In his interpretation and reconstruction of Chinese philosophy, the need for devising detailed arguments for his specific views on particular problems apparently seemed less urgent to him than the encyclopaedic obligation to cover all relevant developments in China’s intellectual history. Mou’s terminological idiosyncrasies along with the recurrent lack of explicitness in decisive passages of his works have provoked highly controversial assessments of his philosophical references, most obviously so with respect to Kant.<sup>8</sup> In this context it reads like a caveat against underestimating Mou’s familiarity with Kantianism, when Clower relates a case where his understanding of Mou’s use of the recognisably Buddhist term *xiang* (相 “distinctive mark”) profited from taking into account the Kantian implications suggested by Mou’s glosses (pp. 216–217).

Clower starts his introduction (pp. 1–27) with a concise portray of Mou Zongsan and his time. He explains his selection of essays and highlights the most important aspects of Mou’s thought as they emerge in the anthology. His compilation of essays aims to gather texts of a general significance for understanding the major

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<sup>8</sup> Thus Lee Ming-Huei characterises Mou’s work as an “immanent critique” of Kant’s philosophy directly inspired by a number of systematic difficulties with Kant’s thought (Lee 2001: 65). Hans-Rudolf Kantor claims a Kantian perspective and judges Mou’s adoption of Kantian transcendentalism as outright revisionist (Kantor 1999: 438, 443, 451). Schmidt holds that, from within a Kantian frame of reference, Mou’s claim that man can have intellectual intuition “can only strike one as silly” (Schmidt 2011: 268).

tenets of Mou's thought, although Clower admits that his choice clearly reflects his personal interest in the Buddhist-Confucian relationship (p. 5). Many of the essays included are based on lectures addressed to a general public, as they make "more concessions to clarity than usual" (p. 6). Clower's consideration of Buddhist influences on Mou's thought makes this selection of essays especially valuable, as it focuses on an aspect of Mou's work which, compared to Mou's studies on Neo-Confucianism and his work on Kant, is still underrepresented in the growing literature on Mou's thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Clower arranges Mou's essays in three loosely defined topical groups dedicated to the future of Chinese philosophy, its methodology and problems, and its history, respectively (p. 7).

The first part, "The Future of Chinese Philosophy" (ch. 1–3), gathers three essays by Mou composed between 1990 and 1992. In "Objective Understanding and the Remaking of Chinese Culture" (ch. 1, pp. 31–60), a keynote address at the first International Conference on New Confucianism in 1990, Mou relates his call for a Confucian revival of Chinese culture with an acerbic complaint about the paltry level of scholarship in twentieth century China. He criticises some of the intellectual giants of the Republican period, both his adversaries like Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) and his Confucian comrades-in-spirit Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) and Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968). In Mou's view, their common failure was their lack in what he calls "objective learning". This concept appears to be related to the comprehensiveness and factual accuracy of one's studies, but also to scholarly impartiality and moral steadfastness. However, the significance of this term appears rather elusive and the concept remains pale, not least in contrast to Mou's harsh judgements on most of his colleagues. Although this text stays rather vague philosophically, its placement at the very beginning of the anthology is nonetheless a convincing editorial decision: It presents Mou's personal view back on the formative period of his thought in his younger years and thus resumes the introduction topically, complementing it with his subjective perspective on the intellectual world of Republican China. Chapter 2, "The Chinese Idea of Settling Oneself and Establishing One's Destiny" (pp. 61–69, 1991), revolves around Mencius's notion of "establishing one's fate" (*li ming* 立命) and emphasises the crucial role of rationality and of people's immanent morality for a successful

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<sup>9</sup> This is true in spite of Hans-Rudolf Kantor's work on Mou's studies on *Tiantai*-Buddhism (Kantor 1999, 2006), Clower's own publications on the topic (Clower 2010, 2011), and a special forum on Mou Zongsan and Buddhism in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (vol. 38, 2nd issue) published in 2011.

modernisation of China. In “Meeting at Goose Lake – The Great Synthesis in the Development of Chinese Culture and the Merging of Chinese and Western Tradition” (ch. 3, pp. 70–87), Mou’s keynote speech to the second International Conference on New Confucianism in 1992, Mou, encouraged by the withdrawal of Marxist-Leninist materialism from academic discourse in the People’s Republic, conjures the imminent realisation of a new “idealism” (p. 77) combining a Chinese-style “mind-only theory” (*weixinlun* 唯心論) with Western philosophy (p. 83).

The second part of the anthology, dedicated to concepts and problems of Chinese philosophy (ch. 4–6), starts with “Philosophy and the Perfect Teaching” (ch. 4; pp. 91–94), a short discussion of the Buddhist notion of the “perfect teaching” which is pivotal for Mou’s project of synthesising Chinese and Western philosophy. Heading straight towards the problem of the highest good – the core of his moral metaphysics (p. 91) –, Mou bemoans the alleged theoretical slant of modern European and in particular Anglo-American philosophy and contrasts this to the ancient Greek model of philosophy with its pursuit for the good life. As Mou sees it, the Chinese “teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism represent practical attempts to realise precisely this ultimate goal of philosophy. The outline of Mou’s Confucian critique of the Kantian conceptualisation of the highest good closing this essay shows both the purpose and the philosophical limits of Mou’s endeavour (pp. 92–94). Chapter 5, “Ten Great Doctrinal Disputes in the Development of Chinese Culture” (pp. 95–113), presents Mou’s peculiar perspective on China’s intellectual history. The reason why Clower includes this sketch of Mou’s view on the history of Chinese philosophy is the rationale structuring his presentation: For Mou, Chinese intellectual history revolves around a notion of moral self-cultivation that leads, through the centuries, to an ever increasing awareness of the alleged core of Chinese thought. Mou chooses to present this growing insight into the purported essence of human nature as a series of intellectual disputes each of which marks a decisive advancement towards what Mou regards as a full-fledged notion of moral autonomy. When he eventually arrives at what he considers the pressing conflict of his own time, it becomes evident just how tightly this view on the intellectual past of China is entwined with Mou’s culturalist agenda for its present: The last dispute included is nothing less than the fight between the irreconcilable antipodes of Communism and Chinese culture. “Transcendental Analysis and Dialectical Synthesis”, given as a keynote speech at a conference of East-West comparative philosophy in 1993, forms chapter 6 (pp. 114–122) of the collection. Mou here delineates his own understanding of dialectics as a peculiar method of spiritual cultivation that leads to a higher state through contradictions (p. 114).

He deplores the weakness of Hegel's notion of dialectics which he considers as a conflation of the processes of thinking and being. *This* in fact is nothing less than Hegel's original sin in philosophy, as from here, there is a straight line to Marx and to the calamities of twentieth century China (pp.118–119). One serious consequence of Mou's revision of Hegelian dialectics, inadvertent or not, is the disposal of the latter's crucial insight that the subject and its consciousness are the outcome of a real historical process. True, without the possibility to reach the eventual aim of the dialectics of liberation – the ultimate state of freedom and equality of all human beings – Hegelian dialectics loses its potential to conceive of an end of the struggle for freedom. Still, Hegel speaks about historical subjects, individuals who fight for their freedom. It is precisely this struggle which is thought to drive history ahead, a rationale Mou simply chooses to ignore. In stark contrast to Hegel's concept, Mou's "spiritual dialectics" moreover leads the individual practitioner of self-cultivation to find peace in his insight that, in spite of all the hardship and injustice in this world, he is, on a more fundamental level, "complete here and now" (p.121). Mou's attempt to "avoid" the catastrophes provoked by the untameable struggle for freedom thus not only forsakes the theoretical punchline of Hegelian dialectics, it also replaces real liberation with the merely spiritual freedom of inner consolation.

The third part of the collection, "History of Chinese Philosophy" (ch. 7–10), gathers a series of texts considerably older than those presented in the first two parts. Chapter 7, "Confucian Moral Metaphysics" (pp.125–144), was originally published in 1975 and presents Mou's particular view on Confucianism with its strong emphasis on the "teaching of the heart-mind" (*xinxue* 心學). The prominence of this variant of imperial Neo-Confucianism results from Mou's decision to assess the philosophical value of Neo-Confucian teachings on the basis of the criterion of whether they acknowledge a priority of practical over theoretical reason. For him, the most mature expression of such a prioritisation is the identification of "mind" (*xin* 心) and "reason" (*li* 理) which he somewhat daringly identifies with the Kantian concepts of conscience and moral law: On this rationale, Kant himself fares better than Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), but is far behind Mencius (tr. 372–289 BC), Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1192) or Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) (p.131). Unlike Zhu Xi, Kant is said to have recognised the priority of practical over theoretical reason: But his conception of the connection of free will and moral law for Mou is inferior to that of the proponents of *xinxue*, as it fails to account for a *principium executionis* of the moral law. This essay thus nicely illustrates how deeply Mou's interpretation and assessment of traditional Chinese thinkers is soaked with Kantian ethics – even if the precise relation between Kantian and Confucian

terms is often left implicit and rather results from what Stephan Schmidt has characterised as a hermeneutic strategy of “translation qua equalisation”.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 8, entitled “Three Lineages of Song-Ming Confucianism” (pp. 145–175), also deals with Mou’s reappraisal of imperial Neo-Confucianism which results in his refutation of Zhu Xi’s and Cheng Yi’s 程頤 (1033–1107) orthodox status due to their alleged failure to appreciate the concrete and creative-cum-practical rather than abstract and theoretical character of the Confucian Way. Chapter 9, “The Rise of Buddhist Learning in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Sui, and Tang” (pp. 176–199), is Mou’s first lecture in a course on Mediaeval Buddhism held in 1976–1977. In spite of its title, this essay is mainly an excursion through the intellectual history of China from the early imperial era to the twentieth century. Mou seizes the opportunity to present his highly problematic assessment of Qing evidential scholarship according to which there is a straight line from evidential scholarship to the positivist intellectual climate of twentieth century China that allegedly prepared the ground for the rise of the Communist Party. Mou fails to substantiate this claim, and the only commonality between evidential scholarship and the intellectual atmosphere of twentieth century China seems to be the tendency – equally dangerous and contemptible in Mou’s view – to detach erudition from spiritual cultivation. Chapter 10, “The Place of the Tiantai Tradition in Chinese Buddhism” (pp. 201–211), contains a discussion of the concepts of “discriminating” (*fenbie* 分別的) and “non-discriminating” (*fei fenbie* 非分別的) explanation which are indispensable for understanding the Tiantai conception of a “perfect teaching” so crucial for Mou’s own philosophy.

In a separate appendix (pp. 213–224), Clower eventually provides a translation of one of the more arcane passages of Mou’s 1975 *Phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself* (translated by Clower as “Appearance and Thing-in-Itself”, see p. 213). It deals with the self-negation of the moral heart-mind and its subsequent transformation into object-oriented understanding. This shows that Clower does not shy away from Mou’s more difficult and problematic texts. It is not only the highly figurative and fleeting language which renders this core piece of Mou’s philosophy so difficult. Not least, it illustrates the extent to which Mou’s thought is entrenched in a kind of metaphysical speculation which tends to remain as opaque as it is likely to alienate many modern academic readers. According to the present reviewer, Mou’s figure of a self-negating infinite cosmic consciousness marks the point where the limits of his essentialist culturalism surface most blatantly. This emerges if one relates it to one of the most striking features of Mou’s thought: his obstinate anti-Communism.

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<sup>10</sup> Schmidt 2011: 264.



At one point, Mou claims that “my disgust for Marx is not a bias but a true inability to appreciate him” (p. 53). However, Mou’s refusal of Communism strikes one as extremely emotional and hardly ever argued for. Polemically put, there appears to be a hefty dose of irrationality in play here: “Communism is a demonic heresy and should be thoroughly eradicated” (p. 112), and “Mao Zedong was a great devil” (p. 119). Again, in view of the political catastrophes in the aftermath of the Communist seizure of power one can understand Mou’s fervent anti-communism. Still, it is rather surprising that a thinker of his format and with his obsession with the problem of the Modern decided simply to ignore the theoretical aspects of Marx’s critique of capitalist modernity. Mou’s negligence of non-spiritual factors in the course of history is most strikingly reflected in his exaltation of “moral knowing” which at one point he characterises as follows: “The expression of moral knowing on the spot as filiality and reverence for elders and love is something that issues forth in response to circumstances, and the mind that is expressed is an absolute one” (p. 166). This kind of instantaneous moral knowing is precisely what according to Mou is realised in intellectual intuition: As soon as I stand face to face with my parents, I not only suddenly and intuitively know how to act correctly but I cannot but realise adequate filial behaviour. Mou thus *essentialises* morality and defines as human nature a set of social norms of interpersonal relationships. Turning into “anthropological constants”, moral norms are here elevated above the merely accidental course of history and unhinged from their connection to the conditions of particular forms of society. With Mou, the absolute moral mind which warrants the eternal validity of moral norms has the power consciously to negate itself and to provide the conditions for establishing a Chinese modernity which has science and democracy and all the other desirable ingredients of a modern society. Such unswerving confidence and solemn elation almost unwittingly invokes Marx’s and Engels’s wake-up call in the *Communist Manifesto*: In capitalist modernity, a definite end is put to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. The motley of ties that bound man to his “natural superiors” is torn asunder, what used to be holy is profaned. To be sure, the rhetorical pathos of the *Manifesto* itself may today appear as outdated as some of Mou’s moralistic and metaphysical musings. Yet, however moot Marx’s and Engels’s own analysis of the dynamics of modernisation may prove, it could still have alarmed Mou that Hegelian and Marxian historical dialectics after all might be more than mere fanatic devilry resulting from a cataclysmal category error. Mou’s culturalism and moralism at any rate seem a rather unconvincing response to the impositions of modernity – and one suspects that he might have profited from taking intellectually more serious his most passionately abhorred enemy.

Clower's selection of essays by Mou Zongsan is an excellent introduction into the intellectual world of one of the most influential thinkers of China's twentieth century. The essays chosen are very different in character, but their arrangement is well-considered and in their entirety they yield a representative and detailed picture of Mou's vision of Chinese philosophy. Anyone interested in the history of New Confucianism and in the intellectual history of twentieth century China in general will profit from reading this book. The book includes a helpful index which facilitates the reader's orientation, and numerous notes ensure that it is also accessible to a broader public.

*Late Works of Mou Zongsan* doubtless is an impressive proof of Mou's erudition. Whether Mou is the *philosopher* of first rank suggested by Clower is likely to remain controversial also among future readers of this anthology.

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